

## “Put not / Beyond the sphere of your activity”

O'Brien, Richard

DOI:

[10.3366/bjj.2016.0163](https://doi.org/10.3366/bjj.2016.0163)

License:

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

O'Brien, R 2016, "Put not / Beyond the sphere of your activity": the fictional afterlives of Ben Jonson', *Ben Jonson Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 169-191. <https://doi.org/10.3366/bjj.2016.0163>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### **Publisher Rights Statement:**

Checked for eligibility: 15/03/2019

This is the accepted manuscript for a forthcoming publication in Ben Jonson Journal published by Edinburgh University Press. The Final published version can be found at: <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/bjj.2016.0163>

### **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

**“Put not / Beyond the sphere of your activity”: The Fictional Afterlives of Ben Jonson**

ANNE

Get out! You, your friends, your blasphemous theaters, have brought nothing but ruin and dishonor to this family.

JONSON

Ruin? Dishonor? Madam. You, your family, me, even Elizabeth herself shall be remembered solely because we had the honor to live whilst your husband put ink to paper.

– *Anonymous* (2011, dir. Roland Emmerich)<sup>1</sup>

Peter Kirwan has pointed out that the category of “not-Shakespeare” inevitably contains “Shakespeare as absent presence in a way that arguably haunts all treatments of Shakespeare’s contemporaries.”<sup>2</sup> Ben Jonson’s words to the wife of Earl of Oxford, presented as the author of the Shakespeare canon in the film *Anonymous*, effectively echo the sentiment, and the existence of *Anonymous* itself demonstrates one of the issues at hand. The paucity and distance of recorded fact, at four centuries’ remove from the lives portrayed, leads to the transpositions of creative speculation, and eventually to the curiously bloodless, near-anonymized figure of Jonson in John Orloff’s script. This process is, nonetheless, especially strange because Jonson’s colorful life, in comparison to Shakespeare’s, is much better documented in the historical record.

No such treatment exists in a vacuum, however, and there are centuries of literary history behind Orloff and Emmerich’s portrayal of a figure described by Nick Tanner in the online edition of the Cambridge *Works of Ben Jonson* as a “second-rate and colourless hack ... slow-witted and humourless” who presents a “negative image” of the historical Jonson: “it would be harder to get a

less accurate picture of the man than [Sebastian] Armesto's lifeless stooge."<sup>3</sup> Between the real-life playwright and the Hollywood cipher, something drastic has happened to our cultural understanding of who Jonson was and did – something upon which questions of “accuracy” have little bearing. The current state of that understanding is a product of the evolving and contrasted reputations and cultural meanings of Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. In this article I will sketch the historical development of a certain pseudo-biographical narrative of Jonson's life defined in relation to the emerging narrative of Shakespeare's, arguing that the gradual diminution of Jonson's own complexities was a grim corollary of the establishment of Shakespeare as a site of primary interest. I will then turn to some examples of Jonson-characters in twentieth and twenty-first century literature and film — including *Anonymous*, Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon's *No Bed for Bacon*, Rudyard Kipling's “Proofs of Holy Writ”, Edward Bond's *Bingo*, and Jude Morgan's *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* — which show the continuing presence of this tradition in creative art, even after it has receded in scholarly accounts of the period and its authors.

\*

“All reputations rest on a razor-edge of luck,” writes the playwright, director and adaptor of Jonson, Peter Barnes.<sup>4</sup> And as luck would have it, Jonson's much-reduced reputation precedes him in the choices made by artists engaged in the ongoing fictionalization of the English Renaissance. Unlike his direct contemporary, Shakespeare, and his forebear, Christopher Marlowe, Jonson seems rarely – *Anonymous* aside – to have enjoyed the central status of fictive hero in any creative work set in the period. Recent exceptions to this dictum include the anti-Oxfordian detective novella *Cry Murder! In A Small Voice* (2013) and its sequel *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* (2014), by Greer Gilman, and *Tobacco Wars* by Paul Seesequasis (2010), which casts Jonson alongside Pocahontas in the context of the European colonial presence in North America. *Ben and Jamie*, a play by Brean

Hammond which premiered on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2016 in a student production at the conference “‘Dare to tell’: Silence and Saying in Ben Jonson”, also engages at length with a complex Jonson whose blend of skepticism and superstition it treats with intellectual seriousness. I thank Martin Butler for bringing many of these works to my attention: although they will not be discussed in the following pages, their reappropriations of the Jonson character clearly merit further academic study.<sup>5</sup>

More often than not, however, Jonson has been relegated to a background figure, “a bricklayer that knows Greek” as Shakespeare first encounters him in Anthony Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964).<sup>6</sup> Even when he does not appear by name in such early modern theatrical fictions, the centripetal force of Shakespeare tends to position Marlowe as prophetic precursor and Jonson as belated respondent. The cultural centrality of Jonson, within his own time and the decades after, makes his subordination to Shakespearean narratives especially surprising: the position he occupies in the present day is, as Barnes suggests, far from inevitable. I propose that the supposedly factual narratives about Marlowe and Jonson offered by biography and literary criticism, and the fictional versions of each writer these have since inspired, have developed in the context of a protective impulse towards the reputation of Shakespeare, and that Jonson's apparent demotion is one outcome of this development. If even Shakespeare's reputation rests on a razor's edge, in Barnes's phrasing, the mythographic re-creations of these two authors might be considered a wider cultural attempt to divert the blade.

The dynamism, flair and proto-modernity accorded to Marlowe — the most historically remote writer of the three — are possible in part because his conveniently early death allows him to be swept aside, making space for the Shakespeare mythos. Such qualities rarely find their way into fictional treatments of Jonson, who himself began to construct the late author's literary reputation, thus becoming a potential challenge to later versions of that mythos. Furthermore, Gary Taylor has

identified how, as “the most familiar source of information about Shakespeare,” Jonson's opinions on the work, positive and negative, and the implicit challenge his contemporary success, both during and after Shakespeare’s life, offered to its hegemonic dominance could not be ignored. Jonson, in brief, stands too close to Shakespeare, and as these challenges “had to be rebutted frontally,” in order to neutralize the threat that Jonson — his closest rival, his first critic, and the embodiment of a notably different and once more tangibly influential creative practice — posed to the singularity of Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup> As such, Jonson’s presentation as pedantic, ponderous, and ultimately outdated and outclassed is a by-product of the fictional Shakespeare from whom he is commonly inseparable.

\*

One striking feature of early anecdotes about Shakespeare and Jonson is the occasional interchangeability of the two authors. In recent fictions, including *Shakespeare in Love*, this kind of confusion over Shakespeare's unique identity – particularly in relation to Marlowe – can be the source of narrative and cultural anxiety. Before the deification of Shakespeare, however, it signifies little more than the vagaries of early attempts at biography, where a good story matters more than a true account. Hence we find a story about Shakespeare's ready poetic wit enabling him to wriggle out of a debt to a vintner reappearing in the 1790s as one of *Ben Johnson's Jests* in the compendium of the same name.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a tale disseminated by Sir Nicholas L'Estrange, where Shakespeare stands as godfather to Jonson's child and offers him “a dozen good latten spoons” which the more scholarly Jonson can “translate,” finds its way into the notebooks of the 17<sup>th</sup> century churchman, Archdeacon Thomas Plume. For Plume, however, the child is Shakespeare's and the witty rejoinder Jonson's.<sup>9</sup>

The ease with which Plume, inadvertently or otherwise, reverses the characters indicates that the biographical reputations of the two men by this point were far from codified. In allowing Jonson to “best” Shakespeare, Plume's version of events shows a hierarchy in flux; Samuel Schoenbaum notes that in the period after their deaths, though “interest was keen in both poets,” it was “especially” so in Jonson (92). Early anecdotes such as Thomas Fuller's, expressing their relationship as a series of “wit-combats,” tend towards a close, friendly rivalry, though one popular story recorded by Nicholas Burgh seems eerily prescient:

Mr. Ben. Jonson and Mr. Wm. Shake-speare being merry at a tavern, Mr. Jonson having begun this for his epitaph:

Here lies Ben Johnson that was once one

he gives it to Mr. Shakespear to make up, who presently writes:

Who while he liv'd was a slow things [*sic*],

And now being dead is nothing. (Schoenbaum 76)

Jonson's apparent laboriousness is one step on the path to being eclipsed by his tavern companion. By 1728 we hear from Pope that “It was, and is, a general opinion, that Ben Jonson and Shakespeare lived in enmity against one another” (Schoenbaum 97). This is the beginning of what Schoenbaum describes as “the myth of Jonson's antagonism towards Shakespeare, a hostility engendered by pride and malevolence” (97). Ian Donaldson has seen the roots of this myth in the still-coalescing concept of the isolated Romantic genius:

For eighteenth-century readers genius was necessarily a unique and lonely quality, which needed moreover to be defined in relation to a perceived opposite. It was Jonson's great misfortune to be selected as Shakespeare's defining opposite ... [and] the figure of envy.<sup>10</sup>

Attributions of envy play a clear role in the creation of a hierarchy of ability, but for proponents of Shakespeare's brilliance — understood and amplified in contrast to the failures of Jonson — this ranking could be shored up by emphasizing a difference in temperament. The scapegoating of Jonson allowed all manner of things to be done to him, with this justification — his petty and self-aggrandizing enmity towards the figure fast becoming our national poet — “forming the flimsy basis for an elaborate fiction concerning Jonson's character” in the back of the collective consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Jonas Barish lists some of the methods by which the now-familiar “character” of Jonson was created, and the unifying reason behind them all:

To the extent to which they articulated their own motives, the critics aimed to deify Shakespeare, to show that in the precise degree to which Jonson was raucous, hostile, and vindictive, Shakespeare was gentle, mild and forbearing ... But this ostensible purpose, however perverse in itself, concealed, one suspects, a deeper one: the desire to find a suitable victim to maul and mangle.<sup>12</sup>

Though such attributions were still occasionally in flux, one eighteenth-century story from *Shakespeare's Jests, or the Jubilee Jester* (c.1769) illustrates just one such mauling, where stereotypically Jonsonian traits are identified and chastised by a Shakespeare readily establishing his dominance. The Shakespeare-and-Jonson “wit-combat” tradition, for at least some readers, had resolved itself into a narrative of clear oneupmanship by the quick-thinking Shakespeare over the notably less fluent Jonson: “Shakespear seeing Ben Johnson in a necessary-house, with a book in his hand reading it very attentively, said he was sorry his memory was so *bad*, that he could not *sh-te without a Book*” (Schoenbaum, 160-1).

This version of Jonson's pedantry owes as much to competing theories of art as it does to scatological insult. Jonson's toilet reading is mocked in the service of a narrative whereby the author is tediously careful, hide-bound, and unable to engage in the most rudimentary activities without direction from the literary past. Shakespeare, by contrast, stands for free-flowing, self-generating inspiration, and this set of associations prepares the ground on which he can most comfortably triumph. In narrative terms, Jonson has to become pedantic so that Shakespeare (whose own life records read as relatively free of incident) can be interesting. As Jonson's role in these kinds of stories is to offer a tedious and didactic counterweight, the pervading air of tedium is transferred to his own biography: a curious fate for a man once directly associated with religious dissent and political sedition, who was repeatedly incarcerated and who, in contrast to the slight and ambiguous evidence for Marlowe's *sub rosa* state service, by his own admission had killed at least two men by the age of twenty-seven.

The false dichotomy between the two playwrights – one free and fluent, one dull and plodding – offered by the *Jubilee Jester* was often framed as the familiar contest between Art and Nature. Jonson had, after all, told Drummond that “Shakespeare wanted art”, although lines from his commendatory poem to the latter's First Folio — ‘Yet must I not give Nature all; thy art, /My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part’ — would seem to offer an exact counter-claim.<sup>13</sup> Thus constructed, the opposition allowed historical narratives, and later fiction, to depict a Ben Jonson defined more by his self-glorifying prefaces and catty off-stage comments than his creative work. Focusing on Jonson's artistic theories and opinions on his contemporary also had the effect of tidying away Jonson's plays themselves in favour of their paratexts, which could then be attacked in their own critical terms, falsified by the very fact of Shakespearean success.

Sidelining Jonson's plays is, if nothing else, a helpful rhetorical move, because in their theatrical



vibrancy and difference from Shakespeare's they pose the clearest challenge to an image of the period where one playwright reigns supreme. The consequence of this realignment today is that Jonson's plays cannot be got to *except* through Shakespeare, whose practice and popularity blocks us from seeing them clearly: with Shakespeare always edging into the frame, the creative Jonson can never be a truly central figure. This shift in focus also meant that though Jonson would eventually return to the stage, and to mainstream literary-critical discussion, the damage to his image in the popular imagination had been done, not least because as Richard Burt notes, "mass culture narratives rely on dated scholarship."<sup>14</sup>

The envious, pedantic Jonson is not the only version known to fiction writers: Butler has mapped out a counter-narrative, dating back at least to Alfred Noyes's *Tales of the Mermaid Tavern* (1913), in which the playwright is convivial, magnanimous, bibulous, and wholly unjealous, "a kind of Elizabethan Brian Blessed."<sup>15</sup> This benign Jonson character persists, Butler informs us, in the names of pubs and tobacco adverts, but like his malign double, he has evolved little since the nineteenth-century: although twenty-first-century scholarship recognizes a complex and multifaceted Jonson, his pop-cultural images remain essentially Victorian.<sup>16</sup> This is the case despite efforts on the part of Modernist writers to characterize him as their contemporary, who needed, as Eliot wrote, to be seen in the context of "our London"; thus seen, the poet argues, "[o]f all the dramatists of his time, Jonson is probably the one whom the present age would find the most sympathetic."<sup>17</sup> Jonson in the 1920s and 30s was to be admired, Eliot and Yeats declared, for such qualities as his "brutality," his "lack of sentiment," his "cold implacability"; but with the exception, perhaps, of Bond's *Bingo*, such character traits have appeared only as defects rather than attractive qualities.<sup>18</sup>

This Jonson — cutting-edge, not backward; precise, not flabby — is sadly missing from later fictions, a fact which has contributed to the sanitization and dismissal of the playwright as a

potentially engaging character. That these insights have never truly taken hold of the popular consciousness testifies in many ways to the much-discussed refusal of British culture to digest and internalize the disruptions of Modernism. We tend instead to hold onto the end result of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biographical reframing: a Jonson who existed primarily as a carping critic, an acknowledged second-rater. As such, he could occupy a lower rung in the early modern theatrical hierarchy, that of a background advocate, villain or stooge as occasion demanded, who posed no threat to the now-established Shakespeare because he no longer needed to be taken seriously as a writer of equivalent stature. What is therefore now available for pop cultural depictions to work upon, as Lloyd Davis suggests, is the outcome of a literary-historical tendency “to elide into a single magisterial (and essentially *safe*) figure the complex, combative and shifting personalities” their subject manifested.<sup>19</sup>

\*

In the model sketched above, Jonson's critical writings become the central characteristic available to fiction writers following the “dated scholarship” of earlier historians. Brahms and Simon in *No Bed for Bacon* spotlight this commentator-Jonson. These authors show him, with a characteristic tactlessness, composing the work for which stories such as these imply and re-ensure he will be best remembered: an epitaph for Shakespeare, while his fellow poet is still alive.

In *No Bed for Bacon*, Jonson is first “a red-faced man” and then an angry one: “Interrupted in his composition Ben Jonson glared.”<sup>20</sup> His argumentative nature is hinted at in a surprising antipathy to Shakespeare's sonnets specifically: “I started arguing with Will about a sonnet” is the excuse he offers for having failed to help Burbage build the Globe (139). One telling description sees him “unwilling to be left out of the conversation any longer” (140). But his main contribution in this

cameo appearance is to demonstrate his undying appreciation for Shakespeare, even if (despite the wilfully anachronistic nature of the novel) it is far too early. Shakespeare himself also engages in some critical commentary: having roundly dismissed *Volpone* (much as Kipling has him trash *Bartholomew Fair* and *Sejanus*) Will “pounce[s] on the blank side of Jonson's composition” – a resonant gesture – to begin a poem, only to find his own epitaph already written, which he reads aloud to Jonson's chagrin.

'Is it not good?' asked Ben Jonson uneasily.

'It is good,' said Shakespeare. 'But untimely.' (142)

As if in response to this chronological inappropriateness, a gaggle of prentice revellers “in the courtyard” of this 1590s tavern strike up a tune – a setting of Jonson's own “To Celia”, first published in 1616. Shakespeare returns the favor of his premature Ode by acknowledging Jonson's own abilities as a poet in this composition — one of few by Jonson to survive the nineteenth century — which confers upon him respectability by association. The “genius” apparent in these lines however – which, like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, have somehow “come unstuck in time”<sup>21</sup> – is commended only in the context of a quality which is already outdated, ruefully recognized as something which belongs to an earlier age:

The voices died away.

'O rare Ben Jonson,' said Shakespeare. He was weeping.

Ben Jonson nodded sadly.

'God,' he said. 'What genius I had then!' (143)

Genius in the context of “then” can be praised precisely because it is not “now”; Jonson is

resolutely not our contemporary. Despite the “rare” beauty of Jonson's non-occasional compositions, they often do not make it beyond the “then” of these novels. Instead, the work on which attention focuses is the Ode “To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare”, which has a long tradition of standing for the best of Jonson. This tradition is exemplified by Edmund Wilson, who tempers his criticism by allowing its subject to be “redeemed by his active recognition of Shakespeare's merit”:

In his elegy on Shakespeare especially, in estimating him above all their contemporaries and setting him beside the greatest of the ancients, he does justice to all that is noblest in his own aspiring nature, which had to drag so much dead weight, all that is soundest and most acute in his own cramped but virile intellect. The one thing he really loved was literature, and having served it as well as he could, no touchiness of personal pride could keep him from honouring one who had been fitted to serve it better.<sup>22</sup>

There is something tragic about the way in which Wilson, Brahms and Simon, and the makers of *Anonymous* – where Jonson finally admits that Shakespeare, not he, is the “soul of the age” and thus, implicitly, earns the subsequent court advancement trumpeted in the credits – present the commendatory poem on Shakespeare as the high point of his creative work. In the absence of an obvious end-point such as death for Marlowe, or the creation of an acknowledged masterpiece for Shakespeare, this endorsement comes to stand as the *telos* of his career. Without a clear preordained sense of where Jonson is going – court acclaim? Dotage and penury? Scotland? – later authors have often been content to imply he is going nowhere; that, like Pug in *The Devil is an Ass*, Jonson and his works ought to aspire no higher than to “Stay i'your place, know your own strengths, and put not / Beyond the sphere of your activity” (1.1.24-25).<sup>23</sup>

The sad irony, as Donaldson reminds us, is that “Jonson himself in his own lifetime had placed great faith in the judgment of posterity; however spurned or neglected his works might be in his own age, he never ceased to believe that their true value would be recognized in the years to come.” As such, his “tribute to Shakespeare, 'He was not of an age, but for all time!'", encapsulated his own most powerful ambitions: to live beyond his age, to be matched against the great writers of the past, to be admired by the unknown readers of the future”.<sup>24</sup> In his failure to join Marlowe in a helpfully symbolic death, the abandonment of these ambitions in one single, hard-won act of baton-passing generosity is the sacrifice these “unknown readers” have instead demanded from Jonson for Shakespeare's sake.

Other than this epitaph – a work of criticism as much as poetry – in modern fictions we almost never see Jonson, as we often do Shakespeare and Marlowe, in the act of literary composition. This can be explained by another aspect which sets the fictionalized Jonson apart from his peers, and makes him a less compelling figure: the supposed clarity of Jonson's authorial motives, as declared in his frequent paratexts. Why would we need to recreate how and why a work like *Volpone* came into being when, its Prologue suggests, we already know the answer directly? It comes

from our poet,

Whose true scope, if you would know it,

In all his poems, still, hath been this measure:

To mix profit, with your pleasure ... (5-8)<sup>25</sup>

The false assumptions of “knowability” these paratexts project, in declaring one apparent set of authorial intentions, might obscure other sources, including biographical and contemporaneous political upheavals, which would offer more interesting interpretations and paths forward for

creative artists. On first reading, they appear to reduce authorial complexity, marking Jonson as stably moralistic rather than ambiguous and anarchic. Unlike, say, *Twelfth Night* (in *Shakespeare in Love*) or *Hero and Leander* (in Ros Barber's *The Marlowe Papers*), Jonson's prologues assert that the genesis of these works does not present a mystery to be solved via biographical hermeneutics. Furthermore, Jonson's often-cited disinterest in romance – Robert N. Watson introduces him as “a passionate man with no interest in love” – also seemingly disbars him from another common method for fleshing out the relationship between art and life, familiar in bio-fictions of Shakespeare and Marlowe.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, he cannot be assimilated to the familiar tropes which easily explain and smooth out his complex life decisions by reference to the tried-and-trusted impulses and drives of sexual intrigue. While critics in the nineteenth century and since have reclaimed Marlowe as a proto-Romantic artist “who lived as he wrote in one gloriously short and inspired burst,” in more than one sense, Jonson's documentary and implied biography has been characterized as unromantic.<sup>27</sup>

This puzzling assumption remains largely in place despite the evidence for, *inter alia*, Jonson's many life-threatening arrests: the *Isle of Dogs* scandal factors into almost no fictional narratives, and thus where Jonson is portrayed as a transgressor, it is on aesthetic rather than political grounds. His forms of resistance are fussy, ornery — the “correction” of Shakespeare's dramaturgy and prosody — where Marlowe's are sexy and seditious. Writers in general seem to have found revealing, through creative endeavor, the secret (i.e. imagined) treasons and seditions of Shakespeare more compelling than writing about the crimes of and charges against Jonson which are empirically known. Shakespeare as putative Catholic has been far more inspiring than Jonson as real-life recusant.

The kinds of stories told about Ben Jonson are therefore rarely concerned with connecting his actual

writing with his life experience. A cameo in John McKay's *A Waste of Shame* (2005) as the “rival poet” of Shakespeare's sonnets is a notable exception, but the most extended recent attempt to offer a narrative of Jonson's life which explores his various writings in a biographical context comes in Jude Morgan's *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*. Morgan offers, in essence, a biographical sketch of Jonson's developing aesthetics, and the connection Morgan draws between biography and art does at least make for a more sympathetic, less monolithic Jonson.

Far more than many modern takes on the author, Morgan allows his subject a narrative at least partly independent of Shakespeare, and a degree of individual agency. In his novel, we meet Jonson's mother and stepfather, his wife and mistresses and his ill-fated son. He discusses theatre and personal affairs with his fellow playwrights, and converses with William Camden and Robert Cotton. In short, he exists in a wide and varied social network which, despite his well-documented court connections – as compared to, say, the fervid speculations about Shakespeare and Southampton – rarely makes it into his fictional biography. One would be forgiven for thinking that Jonson never had a family outside of his surrogate ‘sons’ at the Mermaid, never left the Bankside taverns and brothels where he casts aspersions on a coterie of competing authors, and when not actively engaged in drinking or carping, effectively ceased to exist.

Morgan's Jonson is, among other things, a committed classicist and linguistic reformer, whose sense of self-worth is not simply taken for granted but shown in the context of a detailed intellectual and personal history. At the age of eight and suffering at the hands of Robert Brett, he already “intended living for ever, and could not imagine anyone living with any other aim” and, in his first term at Westminster, tells Camden: “I want to be the most learned man in the kingdom”.<sup>28</sup> From this early age, and partly as a reaction formation to what he views as his stepfather's dull and crushing trade – “Ben had to make good his escape. Learning, learning, learning” (22) – the character rapidly

acquires certain *idées fixes*. Asked by Camden what he “would seek to do with your learning”, the young Jonson's ambition coincides with a powerful corrective impulse:

Ben ran his eyes over his schoolfellows: the stupid talking loudly, the ugly mocking themselves to make the handsome laugh. Alliances and need. He heard a farthing rolling on floorboards.

'Make people better,' he said. (24)

On failing to qualify for the Westminster Queen's Scholarship, this hardens into something more vindictive: “The best way to wake up in the morning, he felt, was with the thought: Right – today I get my revenge” (59). Having established his own inflexible core of self-knowledge, he judges others accordingly for their inability to meet his totalizing standards, from his stepfather – “oddly unhandy about everything except bricklaying, which was perplexing – Ben liked people to be consistent, even in their failings” (60) – to Shakespeare, who evades his question “when are you going to reform the drama?” (252). Jonson castigates his fellow writer for his “violation of sense” in the fourth and fifth acts of *Hamlet*: “‘By God, if I had your genius,’ Jonson grumbled, ‘I’d know how to employ it’” (348).

He suspects, however, that the quality of indeterminacy his friend apparently possesses is what allows him to produce great art. When asked why he refuses to talk about himself, Will's response gestures to an absence at his very core which Jonson finds frightening:

'You can't talk of what isn't there,' Will said, with a faint smile: last candle being put out.

Or what can't be measured, thought Ben. And then: Is that how he does it? The thought made his mind reel a little, and he sat on long after Will had shaken his hand and gone,



drinking, until he had dragooned his thoughts into place again, and denied chaos. (343)

Shakespeare acknowledges the very blurriness of his own inner life which makes novels like this necessary, and for Jonson, such ambiguity — both in the life and the work — is intellectually and ethically troubling. The “dusky vacancies” exemplified by Shakespeare are at odds with the intellectual engagement Jonson is seeking from art: “I want to inspire thought, reflection, moral improvement,” he tells Shakespeare after the failure of *Sejanus* (327). The following exchange of views provides an insight into the two authors' relationship to their audience, a battle between populism and didacticism, and between two competing approaches to character, one of which we read as hopelessly unmodern in the wake of Shakespeare's dominance: “One fool is like another, one thief is like another, and if we do not march them in file in our mind, then chaos is come again. Aye, your words, Will” (354).

The end-point of Morgan's story is a revealing portrait of an apparent artistic breakthrough which comes from a collision between Jonson's schematic approach to the making of art, as outlined above, and his raw personal experience of grief. Love, familial rather than romantic, is central in this turning point. Jonson's loss of his son is first experienced as

A terrible injustice, a flagrant injustice meted out to him – how could it be? – just when he has begun to garner the rewards of talent and industry, and is in a way to become the most learned man in England ... Ben gasps. Masters himself. 'My son.' (424)

The letter announcing his son's death is revealingly portrayed as “a text beyond exegesis”, in response to which Jonson seeks – perhaps for the first time – “Just some words, some words from the heart to soothe a little their mutual wound of grief” (425-6). When the right words come, it is as

if automatic:

At last his pen moves. Rhyme hums a quiet note, reason puts on the firm armour of metre.

His breath ceases to be ragged and whistling. Shape from storm. (426)

Art here is the restoration of order – earlier in the novel Jonson asserts to Shakespeare that “[a]rt wasn't life [...] art was rescue of order from the messy wreck of life” (274) – but even if the process of writing is presented as painstaking problem-solving rather than emotional therapy, it is implied that as nothing before, the wrecking of the writer's own life allows him to attain a higher level of aesthetic harmony. This moment of artistic inspiration comes not from book-learning, but “from the heart.”

Douglas Lanier has stressed the inevitability of this biographical view of authorship for the entertainment industry – “it is difficult to imagine how one might make an interesting film from a writer seated at his book-laden desk scribbling scripts” – but also identifies a cultural narrative whereby, for a successful author, it must take primacy over other models:

[T]he principle of authorial biographicality, the notion that the art is fundamentally expressive of, or at least deeply co-extensive with, the author's life [...] is often positioned against rival models of authorship that the writer must reject to become 'authentic': a professional conception of writing as verbal or adaptational craft, a commercial conception of writing as genre-driven, profit-oriented entertainment for the masses, a high-cultural conception of writing as a learned dialogue with literary tradition.<sup>29</sup>

When we note how important at least the first and third of these “models” are in this, and other,

presentations of Jonson, we can see what is at stake in Morgan's choice of this scene and this realisation as the character's final moment: despite his lifelong dedication to the acquisition of knowledge, Jonson has to understand that some things have to be learned the hard way. Given that much of the book shies away from direct authorial biographicality as an explanation for Shakespeare's texts, this seems an odd choice. Nonetheless, it suggests from a different perspective how *his* reasons for creating are often held apart from other people's; how the composition of *his* work often has to conform to a different and inscrutable standard. Jonson, however, comes to realize that his biographical experience cannot be dismissed despite his own theories, because this seemingly unsurmountable challenge in his personal life leads to his best work yet. At his lowest ebb, he can find comfort in compositional choices: “[f]rom somewhere in his heart Ben puts forth thankfulness, for this: oh, experience, the great true father of art.” (426)

While such an extensive engagement with the arc of Jonson's writing career is in itself notable, Morgan's justification – in an interview appended to the novel – for exploring this trajectory still makes clear what place Jonson is intended to occupy in the fictionalized hierarchy of early modern theatre.

I wanted to make it clear that Shakespeare was not a solitary genius, single-handedly inventing Elizabethan drama. He was one of many: perhaps the most consistently successful, but still working in a crowded marketplace. I also wanted Jonson, a scholarly and painstaking writer, to throw into contrast the amazing facility of Shakespeare's genius. Jonson couldn't see how he did it; nor can we. (444)

Whoever else is crowding the early modern theatrical marketplace, they earn their keep at least partly by sharing something of the contemporary reader's perspective. Unable to compete with or

fully understand Shakespeare's creativity, Jonson's reactions are like those of a front-row spectator at a magic show – closer than us, but still on our side of the line – and his own work provides a “contrast” which better illuminates the fundamental difference and otherness of Shakespeare's talent.

Here is another of Jonson's fictional functions: he serves as an avatar who can stand in for our own occasionally violent struggle with Shakespeare's unknowable brilliance. This incomprehensibility is what Jonson wrestles with in Edward Bond's *Bingo* (1973):

Life doesn't seem to touch you, I mean soil you. You walk by on the clean pavement. I climb tall towers to show I'm clever. Others do tricks in the gutter. You are serene. Serene.<sup>30</sup>

The factors motivating Jonson's explicitly-stated hatred take in a frustrated desire for rural tranquility – “To spend my life wandering through quiet fields” (50) – and an awareness of how Shakespeare's timeliness and simplicity – “How have they made you so simple?” (48) – contrasts with what he sees as his own inevitable belatedness and prolixity: “My death will be terrible. I'll linger on in people's way, poor, thick, dirty, empty, a mess. I go on and on, why can't I stop? I even talk shit now.” (48) His belief that Shakespeare is somehow immaculate, free from the factors which taint the lives of ordinary people, chimes with the view Bond scathingly mocks in his comment that “Orthodox critics usually assume that Shakespeare would have driven a car so well that he'd never have an accident”; a view of the sainted Shakespeare the play was explicitly written to challenge.<sup>31</sup> Jonson's words echo those of Friar Peter in *Measure for Measure*, who declares Angelo “as free from touch or soil with her [Isabella] / As she from one ungot” (5.1.140-1).<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare, in Bond's play, follows just this pattern: a powerful man whose *appearance* of innocence is ironized by the play's author and dismantled before its audience.

Jonson's imputations of ease and grace to the play's exhausted, "written out" protagonist (43) contribute to a powerful, suicidal self-loathing which assumes Shakespeare returns his antipathy. This attitude extends to the act of writing itself: Jonson's ambitions are revealed to be largely financial, and his state one of near-constant penury. These conditions contribute to a dark prediction, not only of the end of his life, but also his fictional afterlife: "Base something on me. A minor character who comes on for five minutes while the lead's off changing his clothes or making a last effort to learn his lines" (47). This is the only fictional account I am aware of in which Jonson actually – indirectly – kills Shakespeare, in a kind of assisted suicide. Something of the symbolic power-struggle between the two men in many of these narratives is, however, contained in the description Bond has Jonson give of a figure who fights an impossible battle to sever himself from a seemingly unshakeable opposite:

When I went sightseeing in the mad house there was a young man who spent all his time stamping on his shadow. Punched it. Went for it with a knife. Tried to cut the head off. Anything to be free. (46-7)

Much fiction where Jonson appears alongside Shakespeare finally seems to present him as a shadow to be stamped on. As a strategy for dismissing Jonson, however – not that Bond wishes particularly to protect Shakespeare, either – a belittling mockery may be more insidiously effective than violence. Rudyard Kipling's "Proofs of Holy Writ" returns obliquely to the wit-combat tradition as he shows the "scholarly and painstaking" Jonson (Morgan, 444) in the painful process of being schooled. Engaged, with Shakespeare at New Place, in the translation of the King James Bible, "Will's ear for English clearly comes to prove more valuable than Ben's memory of Latin."<sup>33</sup> As Shakespeare asks him when baffled by the pettiness and artistic barrenness of *Poetaster*, whose

failure Jonson attributes to a defective audience, “What's your commission to enlighten us?”<sup>34</sup> As if in retribution, Jonson slates *King Lear*.

Whereas Marlowe's comments on Shakespeare's work, as in *Shakespeare in Love* and *A Dead Man in Deptford*, are usually taken as helpful advice which guide the development of plays-in-progress, Jonson's find fault with finished artefacts of now-agreed cultural value and are always ignored completely, despite the suggestion in *Discoveries* that a line of *Julius Caesar* was revised on Jonson's insistence. The learning Jonson has “heaped up, lifelong, at my own pains” (150) is revealed to be so much unprofitable hoarding, as Jonson's contributions to the translation work in Kipling's narrative are depicted as largely useless, “an avalanche of instances from Ovid, Quintilian, Terence, Columella, Seneca and others” (153). This pedantic reliance on precedent is implicitly disvalued in relation to Shakespeare's subsequent turn towards the natural world for inspiration: “Will took no heed till the rush ceased, but stared into the orchard, through the September haze” (153).

As Shakespeare begins translating in earnest, Jonson is literally silenced. Having earlier made a misguided bid for posterity – “I grant you your 'Macbeth' as nearest in spirit to my 'Sejanus' ... We'll see which of the two lives longest” (151) – the guest becomes “obedient” as he “concede[s]” to the skill of his friend's *extempore* creation (144-5). As such, eventually he becomes merely the provider of words, a kind of begrudging amanuensis reading from the various prior translations while Shakespeare works his magic. And when his own words, and his own approach to artistic creation – told here, whereas Shakespeare's is shown – become the focus, they are deprioritized by being reported in third-person indirect speech, as if the narrator is summarizing a much longer tirade for the reader's benefit:

In three minutes Ben had launched full-flood on the decayed state of the drama, which he was born to correct; on cabals and intrigues against him which he had fought without cease; and on the inveterate muddle-headedness of the mob unless duly scourged into approbation by his magisterial hand. (158)

The response is a wonderful comic punchline, but one that says much about the hierarchy of early modern perspectives which make it into contemporary fiction: Shakespeare quite simply falls asleep, overcome by heat and boredom, and on waking lies that he has “missed not a word” (158). This is wryly amusing not least because, as readers, we have missed all of them; they have been directed away from us, as not worthy of our attention, by Kipling's magisterial hand. What Shakespeare is doing is implicitly more interesting than what Jonson is saying, even if he is fast asleep.

Nearly eighty years on from Kipling's story, despite the proliferation of Jonson scholarship which Butler has approvingly surveyed, few creative works have appeared that seem to listen in anything more than a tokenistic sense to what Jonson is saying. This is unfortunate because, like Marlowe, Jonson can say much about how we live now, and can do so in ways which we are not necessarily used to hearing. Pop cultural representations have a role to play in this diminishment of Jonson because, for those with only a limited, mediated awareness of the early modern period (and do any of us really have more than this?) they are the noise which masks and blocks the signal of his original works, making it difficult for their messages to get through. The repeated implication, in films and novels like these, is that Jonson's approaches to theatre and literature – unlike Marlowe's and Shakespeare's – cannot be assimilated to modern sensibilities, and linger merely as the alien offshoots of a vanished culture. This does a disservice both to the period they come from and to our own, resulting in the deletion of alternatives and the gradual homogenisation of our cultural image

of the early modern landscape.

Ironically, the time is currently ripe for a representation of Jonson as a main character which does justice to his defects as well as to his virtues. The thriving state of American TV drama testifies to a cultural appetite for stories about “Difficult Men”, as the title of a study by Brett Martin has it: bullish, intelligent, occasionally violent figures who fight their way from poverty to pre-eminence with little but a way with words, a determination to overcome personal obstacles and an uncommon belief in their own abilities.<sup>35</sup> Jonson has not appeared as the flawed, self-willed anti-hero of his own tale since his satirical portrayal as Horace in the subplot of *Satiromastix*. While it may be a stretch to re-cast the playwright as a 17<sup>th</sup> century Tony Soprano, an early modern Walter White, driven by a furious belief in the inability of those around him to recognise his own intelligence and value, there are worse stories to have written for you. *Hamilton* — a production making a similar virtue of intransigence, which in the process revived the reputation of a long-neglected figure — is currently the biggest hit on Broadway. So why not *Jonson*?

Outlandish as this suggestion may be, would it be any more so than announcing to an audience in 1616 that arguably the most famous writer of his day – “Britain’s first literary celebrity”, “a living legend” (Donaldson, *Life* 41) – would in four hundred years be regarded largely as a background character, little more than Shakespeare’s stooge? If, as the character bearing his name asserts in *Anonymous*, Jonson and his fellow playwrights will be “remembered solely” for having had “the honor to live while [Shakespeare] put ink to paper,” then it is as a result of nearly four hundred years of cultural vassalage. If it is, as Donaldson tells us (*Life*, 3) “literally true” that Jonson was buried in Westminster Abbey in a vertical position, standing on his head, perhaps now is the time, metaphorically, for Ben Jonson to stand on his own two feet.



- <sup>1</sup> *Anonymous*, directed by Roland Emmerich, (2011; Sony Pictures Home Ent, 2012), DVD.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Kirwan, "'You Have No Voice!': Constructing Reputation through Contemporaries in the Shakespeare Biopic," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32.1 (2014): 11. Web. 1 Sept. 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Nick Tanner, "Twentieth- and twenty-first century adaptations of the plays of Ben Jonson," *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*. Web. 1 Sept. 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter Barnes, "Still Standing Upright: Ben Jonson, 350 Years Alive," *New Theatre Quarterly*. 3.1 (1987): 203. Web. 1 Sept. 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin Butler, "Memorandums of the Immortal Ben" (paper presented at the conference "'Dare to tell': Silence and Saying in Ben Jonson", University of St. Andrews, Scotland, April 1-3, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Nothing Like The Sun*, (London: Allison & Busby, [1964] 2009), 254.
- <sup>7</sup> Gary Taylor. *Reinventing Shakespeare*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 79-80.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ben Johnson's jests. Or, The Wit's Pocket Companion*, (London, [1760?]), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Web. 22 July 2014. The Shakespeare variation appears in Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 92.
- <sup>9</sup> Schoenbaum, 93. Hereafter cited in text.
- <sup>10</sup> Ian Donaldson, "Looking Sideways: Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myths of Envy," in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, eds. Takashi Kozuka and J.R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 244.
- <sup>11</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 18-19.
- <sup>12</sup> Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson: a collection of critical essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 2-5.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5:361.
- <sup>14</sup> Richard Burt, "Shakespeare in Love and the End of the Shakespearean: Academic and Mass Culture Constructions of Literary Authorship" in *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle*, eds. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 215.
- <sup>15</sup> Butler, "Memorandums."
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Ben Jonson," in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), 97.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 110; W. B. Yeats, "On the Boiler" (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1939), 33.
- <sup>19</sup> Lloyd Davis, "The Love Life of Ben Jonson," in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography*, eds. Takashi Kozuka and J.R. Mulryne (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 228.
- <sup>20</sup> Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon, *No Bed For Bacon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Black Swan, [1941] 1999), 137. Hereafter cited in text.
- <sup>21</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (London: Vintage, [1969] 2000), 19.
- <sup>22</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers: Twelve Essays on Literary Subjects* (London: John Lehmann, 1952), 220.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 4:484.
- <sup>24</sup> Donaldson, "'Not of an Age'", 206-7.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 3:43.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert N. Watson, introduction to *Volpone*, by Ben Jonson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: A & C Black, 2003), vii.
- <sup>27</sup> J. T. Parnell, introduction to *Constructing Christopher Marlowe*, eds. J. A. Downie and J. T. Parnell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.
- <sup>28</sup> Jude Morgan, *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Headline Review, 2012), 21-24. Hereafter cited in text.
- <sup>29</sup> Douglas Lanier, "'There won't be puppets, will there?': 'Heroic' authorship and the cultural politics of *Anonymous*," in *Shakespeare beyond doubt: evidence, argument, controversy*, eds. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 219.
- <sup>30</sup> Edward Bond, "Bingo," in *Plays: Three* (London: Methuen, 1987), 46-8. Hereafter cited in text.
- <sup>31</sup> Edward Bingo, introduction to "Bingo", 4.
- <sup>32</sup> *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>33</sup> Maurice J. O'Sullivan, Jr, "Joseph Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)," in *Shakespeare's Other Lives*, edited by Maurice J. O'Sullivan, Jr (London: McFarland, 1997), 148.
- <sup>34</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "Proofs of Holy Writ," in *Shakespeare's Other Lives*, edited by Maurice J. O'Sullivan, Jr (London: McFarland, 1997), 150. Hereafter cited in text.
- <sup>35</sup> Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution, From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013).